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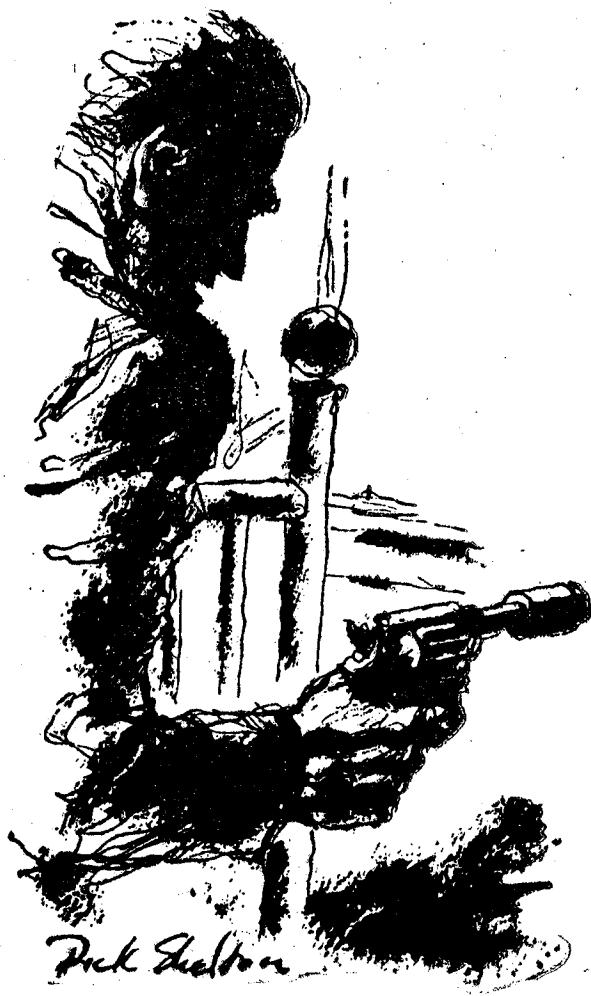
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dead cops are MURDER

I've got to get that plane to St. Paul. If I don't — it's my neck.

BY JACK RITCHIE



Dick Shelton

“KILLING a cop is never a bright idea,” I said. “It makes everybody mad.”

“I don’t give a damn what you think,” Reagan said. “You’re getting paid good to do it.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “All right. I won’t worry about it. I’ll be back in St. Paul on the first plane out, but you’ll still be here and you’re liable to get squeezed rough. They’ll have an idea who called for the job.”

“They won’t squeeze hard if they’re smart,” Reagan said. “If they decide to pull me in for talk, some of the boys will give me advance warning. I got a doc who’ll examine me before. And when my lawyers get me back home, he’ll do it again. If I got so much as a busted fingernail, there’ll be hell raised.”

I sat there with my drink and considered Reagan. He was a big florid man with black hair that straggled wetly over his forehead. He ran

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everything in this town that operated best at night. Reagan used to take care of killings himself, but now that he could wear evening clothes without feeling uncomfortable, he let others do them for him.

"How come one man can bother you so?" I asked. "I thought you owned the force."

"I control pieces of it," Reagan said. "You can't buy a whole police force. It's a simple matter of human stubbornness on the part of some people and also basic economics. You just buy the key pieces, the ones that can be bought, and hope for the best."

He got up to refill his glass. "I don't mind an honest cop here and there, as long as he's stupid. But Randell's got quite a brain."

He tonged ice cubes into his glass. "Nobody can control a town all the time. Every ten years or so the citizens put down their comic books and decide to pick up the cleaning broom. They even go out and vote."

He measured his whiskey by ear. "I don't mind taking a vacation for a while. I need the rest anyway. But I want to do my resting in a nice sunny

place where I don't have to march to the dining hall in formation.

"An honest cop—a real honest, smart cop—stands out in this town like a monk in a convent." He blew cigar ash off his vest. "I'll tell you what's going to happen, Trapp. These amateur boys will win the election, no matter what we do about it. And as soon as they do, they'll look into the clear blue eyes of Randell and hand him the gold badge.

"Randell's been around a long time and he knows what's going on. And what makes it worse is that he'll know exactly what to do about it.

"I could pack up right now and go to Mexico or Cuba and let them have their fun trying to get me to come back. But I don't want to stay out of the good old forty-eight forever. Some day when things are back to normal, I want to come back without the Feds meeting me at the border."

His eyes met mine. "How you gonna do it?"

"The simple way," I said. "Things don't go wrong that way."

"And what time? I got to arrange a party."

I thought it over. "This

Randell married?"

"No. No complications. He lives alone in a small apartment on the corner of 12th and Franklin."

"Then you pick it," I said. He scratched his jaw. "Around eight should be right. Everybody'll still be sober enough at my party to remember I was there."

"You can give me the money now," I said.

I WENT back to my hotel room and napped until about seven. Then I checked the .38 and fitted on the silencer. I shoved it into the briefcase, which I put under my arm, and went downstairs for a bite to eat. I finished at twenty to eight and walked slowly toward 12th and Franklin.

It was a three story building with a foyer just big enough to let two people pass each other. I studied the directory and found that Randell had apartment 25.

I walked up the carpeted stairs until I found the door I was looking for and pressed the buzzer.

He was a medium-sized man in shirt sleeves and he held the evening newspaper open in

one hand. His sharp blue eyes flicked over my face.

"Lieutenant Matt Randell?" I asked.

He nodded his head.

"I'd like to talk to you about something important," I said. "Reagan figures in it."

"Can't it keep a couple more years," he said. "I'm full of Reagan right now."

"It might keep," I said. "But you should be interested right now."

His eyes went over me once again and then he stepped back. I walked into the apartment and sat down. It was a single room with adjoining bath and kitchenette. I put the briefcase on my knees.

Randell stood watching me a few more seconds and then he decided to take a chair opposite me. "I never saw you before," he said.

"And never will again," I said, smiling. "That's why right now is so important to both of us."

His eyes went to the briefcase. "If it's information, I'm listening. If it's money, you're wasting your time."

I unzipped the case and put my hand inside. "No, you're guessing bad." I brought out the .38 and pointed it at his

chest.

He sat without the slightest movement, his eyes traveling from the silencer to my face.

"Do you think you could be bought now?" I asked, interested.

He almost smiled. "I'm considering it."

I shifted my weight to make myself more comfortable. "Can you guess why I'm here?"

He did smile thinly then. "If it's to scare me, you won't go away disappointed."

"No," I said. "It's more serious than that."

His eyes shifted slightly and I knew what he was looking for. His short-barreled .32 was hanging in its holster from the door knob of the closet about six feet away.

I could see that he was going to try for it, but he needed a little talking time to think over the best way to do it.

I wouldn't have minded some talking. I'm always interested in how a man meets death, but I couldn't take a chance. The trouble with these silencers is that they have the habit of jamming the gun after one shot.

I might get him as he made his dive, but the chances were

that I'd need more than one shot to put him away. I didn't like the idea of me with a gun that didn't work and him pulling up one that did.

Regretfully, I squeezed the trigger.

Randell grunted slightly as the slug bored into his flesh and he flopped out of his chair with the unco-ordination of instant death.

I PUT THE gun back in the briefcase, went to the door knob with a handkerchief and let myself into the hall. I was dabbing at the surface of the buzzer with the handkerchief, when I noticed the brown-haired girl at the door of the apartment next to Randell's.

She had two large bags of groceries in her arms and she was having difficulty using her keys to get into the apartment.

She smiled at me. "I hope you don't mind," she said. "But would you hold one of these while I get the door open?"

"Not at all," I said. I took one of them while she unlocked the door.

"Thank you very much," she said as I returned the bag.

She had a nice smile and so I smiled too. I touched the

brim of my hat. "No trouble at all," I said.

Outside on the sidewalk, I took a look at the palm of my hand under the first street-light. Not even moist, I thought in a pleased way.

Sure, she could identify me if she ever saw me again. But she never would. Randell's body most likely wouldn't be found until somebody came to find out why he wasn't reporting for work, and by that time I'd be in St. Paul. She could look through all the mug prints at headquarters until she needed glasses. My picture wasn't in anybody's files.

In my hotel room I packed the briefcase away with the five grand in the suitcase. I glanced at my wrist watch and saw that I had about an hour to kill before I could catch a plane.

I picked up the suitcase and checked out of the hotel. About a block down the street I found a hamburger joint. I got a pack of cigarettes out of the machine and sat down on a stool.

"Two burgers with," I said. "And coffee."

The counterman, a wiry little man of sixty or so, splayed out two balls of meat on the

hot sheet. He drew my coffee and slid the sugar to me.

"Kind of chilly tonight," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "A little nippy." I looked idly around and saw that the only other customer in the place was a sandy-haired man working on a piece of pie in one of the booths.

The counterman put the burgers on a plate and he was just setting them in front of me when the door opened and the two punks walked in. I picked up one burger as I took a look and a prickling came to the back of my neck. Both of them were high on the brown cigarette stuff and the tiny pupils of their eyes glowed. They were in their late teens, pale-faced boys with the thin-shelled bravado of the perpetual delinquent.

I CHEWED slowly and wondered if they were going to go through with it. They hesitated for a moment as they looked around, and then the taller of the two moved to the juke box and turned his back to it. He brought out a rusty looking revolver and swept the room with it.

"This thing works," he said,

his voice high. "Everybody behave and you'll live to tell your grandchildren about it."

The other kid had a better looking gun. "Move away from that cash register, Pop. I'm coming in to take a look."

I noticed the man in the booth lay down his fork. His head went slowly back and forth as he alternately watched one and then the other.

The short, chunky kid went behind the counter and rang up a No Sale. His face twisted in disgust. "A lousy twenty-two bucks."

"What did you expect," Pop said dryly. "This ain't no bank."

The short kid stuffed the money in his pocket and moved out from behind the counter. "Throw your wallets out on the floor," he ordered.

I took mine out carefully and tossed it down. I watched the sandy-haired man get to his feet. He licked his lips for a few seconds and then seemed to take a deep breath. His hand went to the button of his suitcoat.

He didn't quite get the snub-nosed .38 out of the belt holster. The tall punk's gun spit angrily twice. The man in the booth crumpled and he slid

between the table and the bench.

The punk's eyes turned toward me glowing with killer madness.

I dove over the counter as the shots came and landed hard against the shelf of coffee mugs. I lay there hugging the floor, my heart pounding wildly.

After a couple more shots, I heard the sound of a hard slap. "Snap out of it, you damn fool," I heard the chunky kid say. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I heard their footsteps moving fast toward the door, and then I heard the door slam. I lay there unable to get up right away and marveling in a detached way at my trembling and weakness.

Finally, Pop straightened up. He looked over the counter and his mouth got tight. He walked over to the phone.

I came to my senses. It was time to get out. I couldn't get mixed up in anything like this. I got shakily to my feet.

Then I saw the faces pressed against the windows and far away I heard the cat wail of a siren. Pop didn't have to phone, I realized suddenly. Somebody had heard

the shots and done it for him.

I picked up the suitcase and looked at the glass door. My stomach tightened around fear. It was too late to get out.

THREE WERE about twenty people out there and more coming. Their fascinated eyes traveled a thrill circuit from the body of the sandy-haired man, to Pop, and then to me.

I put down the suitcase and wiped the palms of my hands on my trouser legs. I looked at Pop with a weary indignation. "Why did he do it?" I asked hoarsely. "Why did the damn fool go for his gun?"

Pop sat down on one of the stools and reached automatically for the pipe in his shirt pocket. "He had to, mister," Pop said. "He had to because he was a cop."

Pop glanced once more at the body and then looked away. "Joe Farley," he said. "Just a rookie cop. Off duty and all he wanted was quiet and something to eat."

Pop's eyes hardened. "The force ain't all perfume and flowers," he said, "but there's one thing that gets every cop mad. You just don't kill a cop, mister."

His hand brought out a tobacco pouch. "Those two punks are going to fall down a lot of stairs before they ever get to court. A lot of stairs."

Two cops elbowed their way through the outside crowd and into the diner. They looked down at the sandy-haired man silently and then one of them went back out to the squad car.

I picked up my cup of coffee, but I was spilling so much of it that I set it down again. I lit a cigarette instead.

The homicide detectives were there in less than ten minutes and a pair of them took me to one of the booths.

"I'm Sergeant Wilson," one of them said. He was as tall as I am, but thinner and his hair was graying. He cocked a thumb at the other man. "And this is my partner, Sergeant Cooper. Your name, please."

I didn't see how it could hurt to give my right name. I figured they'd want to see my identification papers anyway.

"Trapp," I said. "Charles Trapp."

"Address?"

"2489 North Wendell." As he wrote it down, I added,

"St Paul, Minnesota. I'm just here visiting friends. I have a plane to catch at ten."

"Mister," Sergeant Wilson said, looking up. "A cop's been killed. Your plane can wait."

"Tell us about it," Cooper said. "From the beginning."

I gave them the story and described the two punks.

"You'd recognize them if you saw them again?" Wilson asked.

I hesitated. "Well, I don't know. I was pretty scared."

"You gave a pretty good description," Wilson said. "I think you will." He got up. "You and Pop better come down to headquarters with us. We'd like to have you look at some pictures."

"Look," I said. "Making this plane is important to me."

"I don't hear you, mister," Wilson said.

AT HEADQUARTERS they took Pop and me into a small room and began bringing in folders of mug shots.

"Put the suitcase in the corner if it bothers you," Wilson said.

"It doesn't bother me a bit," I said irritably.

After two hours my cigarettes were gone and Wilson brought me a fresh pack. I was pulling off the red strip, when I glanced down at the next page and there was the tall kid who did the killing.

I lit a cigarette and puffed slowly as I thought it over. Finally, I looked up. "This is one of them," I said.

Wilson got to his feet and came over. He studied the picture and the record. "All right," he said. He picked up the book and took it over to Pop.

Pop blinked his red-rimmed eyes a couple of times before he looked. "It sure is," he said. "It damn well sure is."

I shifted in my chair. "I got a pretty important appointment in St. Paul. Pop ought to be able to spot the other one."

"Keep looking," Wilson said. He left the room with the book and returned about twenty minutes later.

Sergeant Cooper came into the room chewing furiously on a kitchen match. "You mad?" he asked Wilson.

Wilson raised an eyebrow.

"Get a lot madder," Cooper said. "Matt Randell got it too."

"No kidding!" Wilson exclaimed. Cooper walked to the water cooler. "His brother dropped by to borrow Matt's golf clubs. He buzzed, but there was no answer. He tried the door and found Randell on the rug with a slug in his chest." Cooper took a drink of water, crumpled the paper cup and left the room.

I turned a few more pages in the book. I found a photograph that I thought would pass.

"Here's the other one," I said.

Wilson carried the book over to Pop. I glanced at my watch.

Pop shook his head. "Nope."

"Pop can't see," I said.

"M a y b e," Wilson said. "We'll put it aside. Sit down, Mister, and look some more."

Cooper came back. "Found a witness," he said. "A girl who lives next door to Randell saw a man coming out of Randell's apartment this evening. She got a pretty good look and they're bringing her here to look at the pictures. She says he has the first joint of the little finger on his right hand missing. She noticed it

when he touched the brim of his hat."

I closed my right hand and looked at the mug prints until I found one that looked like the chunky kid. "Here he is," I said.

Pop studied the photograph for a minute and I watched him closely.

He sighed. "Nope. A lot like him, but nope."

"You're crazy, Pop," I said. "That's him. I was right there."

"So was I," Pop said. "And I still got twenty-twenty."

I stared at Sergeant Wilson and then went back to the books. The door opened and I jerked involuntarily.

It was a deep voice that spoke from the doorway. "We got them, Sergeant."

I put my hand on the suitcase and got to my feet. Pop took his time getting up, and he stretched.

"Come on, Pop," I said. "Let's get this over with."

WILOSON and Cooper took us into a large room and we saw the two punks sitting on a bench. They were interested only in their pain. The tall thin kid was crying into a handkerchief wet with the

blood from his mashed nose. His face was ragged with cuts made by the ring on somebody's fist. The chunky one was nearly blind from the beating he'd gotten, only a thin slit of iris showing on one eye. He sat with he head low and he crooned in soft misery.

The big beefy bluecoat standing next to them grinned as he reached out for the hair of the chunky kid and jerked his head back so that we could get a better look. "They're a mite messy," he said. "Fell down a couple of times."

I looked down at his big hands and saw the blood crusted on his knuckles. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand.

"We damn near have to guess—the condition they're in," Pop said. "Not that it makes me cry."

Wilson looked them over and turned to the big cop. "You're getting kind-hearted, Harris," he said. "They still got faces."

Harris' grin broadened. "They was just brought in, Sergeant. I ain't had much time."

"It's them," I said, and the timbre of my voice startled me.

"Take your time," Wilson said. "Be sure."

"Damn it," I said. "I'm sure. I'm positive."

"How about you, Pop?" Wilson asked.

Pop tilted his head and considered. I looked up at the wall clock and followed the red second hand as it moved from four to six.

"Come on, Pop," I snapped. "Don't take all day."

"Take it easy," Pop said. He looked them over carefully. "Yep," he said.

"Hold it, Mister," Wilson said. "A few more things we got to do."

They took me and Pop into another room with desks in it and Wilson handed me a sheaf of papers. "Read this carefully, check for any errors, and sign it. It's your statement."

I paged through rapidly and scrawled my signature.

"You read fast, Mister," Wilson said. He looked at my right hand and frowned as though he were trying to remember something.

I went to the door and Wilson came with me. "You're in an awful hurry," he said. "You might as well spend the night in town. No planes leave after eleven."

DEAD COPS ARE MURDER

11

"I'll take a train," I snapped.

"We'll keep in touch with you," Wilson said. "You'll have to testify at the trial."

"Sure," I said. "Sure."

Wilson kept pace with me as I hurried down the corridor. We clattered down the stairway and as we turned at the first landing, I saw her.

She was between two plain-clothesmen and she raised her eyes. They widened in recognition.

The fear tore at my mind and I knew there was only one thing for me to do now. There was just one way out. I dropped the suitcase on the landing and my fingers tore at the clasps.

"What the hell . . ." I heard Wilson say in surprise.

"That's him!" the girl screamed.

I had both the side clasps open in a second and was snapping the lock. My finger-tips just touched the butt of the gun when Wilson's foot lashed out.

It caught me on the side of the face and I clutched at the air as I began falling.

I rolled down the stairs, unable to stop, and the sharp marble edges of the steps slammed into my face and body.

It hurt. It hurt a lot.

But I knew that this was only the beginning.

• • •

Touchy Gunman

Jack L. Meister, 32 and a cab-driver, was handed a dollar bill after delivering his fare to Brooklyn. The meter read seventy-five cents.

Meister gave the well-dressed man the quarter change and the man walked off.

"Hey, don't I get a tip?" the cabbie wanted to know.

Returning to the cab, the man said, "I'll give you a tip!" and shoved a gun through the window. He departed with \$65 of the driver's money.